

Orange County Public Law Library Environmental Scan

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The way in which information is retained and received varies from person to person, however if there is one concept that can be agreed upon it is that the library is generally considered the one place where information is obtained and understood. This is because people from all communities understand that the library is a source of quality and authoritative information (Geiger, 2017). However, it is because of librarians and the actions they take while in the library that help individuals feel at ease with obtaining information. This process of helping people in their quest for knowledge is all handled in the reference interview. The purpose of this paper is to take a look at the reference interview process in the real world and to see how it functions. The Orange County Law Library or OCPLL is the example that will be used to further explore information services and the reference interview process as it occurs in the professional setting. To be able to analyze the process of the reference interview this paper will first take a look at the community that OCPLL is situated in, then it will discuss how the OCPLL conducts its information services followed by look into the methods used to collect the data and discussion about the data.

Community Assessment

Before one can understand how information services and the reference interview can be structured in real life, it is important to consider that the way in which a reference interview will be conducted. This means that one should take into account the types of patrons and the community that the library is situated in. Before discussing how the OCPLL handles its information services, a discussion on Orange County must be had first. Currently Orange County has a population of 3,175,692, and that population is broken up between 49% male and 51% female (Census Reporter, 2019). By race Orange County is broken down into 40% White, 34% Hispanic, 21% Asian, 3% Two or more races, 2% Black, .3% Pacific Islander and .2% Native American (Census Reporter, 2019b). The average income level per capita is \$43,200 which is about 20% higher than in the rest of California and about 20% higher than in the rest of America. Furthermore the 9.4% of people living in Orange County are at poverty level. It should also be noted that when compared to the rest of California that poverty rate of Orange County is at 8%. Covid-19 has also hit Orange County particularly hard and the daily Positive Covid-19 cases is at 1,003, and the cumulative Covid-19 cases that includes deaths is at 233,394 (OC Health Care Agency, 2021).

To interpret this data, it can be understood that Orange County is a community that for the most part is well off and is relatively diverse. However, like the rest of California it does struggle

with poverty and homelessness. While it is lower when compared to Los Angeles which is at 13% (Census Reporter, 2019a) it still is significant number that almost 10% of the population is living at or below the poverty level. When compared to Los Angeles County with Covid-19, Orange County is doing better because Los Angeles County has a reported number of 5,925 cases, and 1,116,892 deaths (LA County Department of Public Health, 2021). Unfortunately, because of the size of Orange County it still means that Covid-19 has killed about 7% of the population (OC Health Care Agency, 2021). These numbers have affected the community and have forced many jobs to close and for Asian Americans in Orange County, they have found it difficult to support themselves with work (Pickert, 2021). The data and the situation that Orange County faces, informs how the work of the law librarians of the Orange County Public Law Library. As will be explained further, the librarians understand that their diverse community is struggling with the Covid-19 crisis and issue of homelessness that existed before and is increasing because of the pandemic. The way in which they are able to help their community comes from knowing their surroundings and providing assistance to the issues they face.

Methods

The methods used to retrieve the information of how the OCPLL conducts its reference interviews and information services was done by reaching out to the library via email and requesting a phone interview. Along with this there was some background research that was conducted using Google, as well as census, and public health databases to gain an understanding of the Orange County area and the library. The reference interview information was obtained through a series of questions that focused on understanding how the library functions. Some questions asked included “How do you help patrons find information” and “What are some of the biggest challenges the library faces when it comes to helping patrons”. The style with which the questions were asked and crafted in a way as to allow open ended answers as well as follow ups so as to allow the librarian that was being interviewed to be able to explain and provide as much detail as possible. These are reworked techniques that are meant for reference interviews, and the concept behind them is to allow the librarian during the reference interview to obtain information from the patron they are helping, and they are meant as way to help the patron effectively communicate their needs (Knoer, 2011; Kay Ann Cassell & Hiremath, 2013).

OCPLL Information and Reference Services

On Friday January 29th, 2021 a phone interview was conducted with Lu Nguyen, a references librarian who works for OCPLL. He explained the processes that OCPLL goes through when helping patrons, as well as a bit about the work environment. Mr. Nguyen explained that the library is set up to help anyone in the community and they that are available to provide reference assistance by email, phone, virtual chat, and face to face interactions (L. Nguyen, personal communication, January 29, 2021). He mentioned that when conducting the interviews he listens intently to the patrons and does his best to explain any thing that they may be confused or unsure about, as well as asking a variety of open and closed ended questions depending on the patron and their needs (L. Nguyen, personal communication, January 29, 2021). He then went on to describe that because of the current pandemic the number of individuals coming in to receive help or even having face to face reference interviews has reduced greatly, that almost no longer happen (L. Nguyen, personal communication, January 29, 2021).

When asked if there was a challenge to being able to provide reference sources or conduct the reference interviews online Mr. Nguyen stated that the difficulty had not increased, was about the same because way in which he would conduct his face to face interviews would be same if it was virtual or through email, or the phone (L. Nguyen, personal communication, January 29, 2021). Essentially it is all about being helpful by actively listening and asking the kinds of questions that allow the patron to guide him to what they are looking for (L. Nguyen, personal communication, January 29, 2021). Mr. Nguyen also explained that even before the pandemic traffic into the library had been slowing down, and this was the cause of the homelessness issue within Orange County (L. Nguyen, personal communication, January 29, 2021). Due to the counties issues with being able to provide services for them, they would be at the library seeking assistance or a place to rest, the librarians were able to do what they could with the resources they had (L. Nguyen, personal communication, January 29, 2021).

Mr. Nguyen discussed that the library mainly deals with individuals who are looking for information on child and family law, family violence and because of the pandemic eviction law information because of the new laws that were put into place in Orange County on how to handle the issue of evictions caused by the loss of work (L. Nguyen, personal communication, January 29, 2021). When helping patrons find this kind of information, Mr. Nguyen states that he lets the patrons know that he can not provide actual legal advice but that can be off assistance to help them find information pertaining to what they are looking for so they can be better informed (L. Nguyen, personal communication, January 29, 2021). To be able to provide his patrons all of this important

information he mentions that it is highly important that they constantly update their collection with the most relevant books, journals and databases (L. Nguyen, personal communication, January 29, 2021). Some of the most key items are the eviction defense manual, the California law, California student law books as well as West Law, Nexus databases (L. Nguyen, personal communication, January 29, 2021).

Interview Analysis

The interesting takeaways from the interview given by Mr. Nguyen show that in a professional setting the reference interview and information service process is heavily reliant on the ability of the librarian to show care and understanding when attempting to help patrons. The goal of the reference interview is to be able to help the patron and to be able to get them the information they need (Knoer, 2011). Over the course of the interview it was made clear that the suggestions and ideas covered in reference interview guides are effective, and some of the same techniques applied in the books are what Mr. Nguyen and his co-workers use every day to assist the community (Kay Ann Cassell & Hiremath, 2013; L. Nguyen, personal communication, January 29, 2021). What OCPLL showed is that the best way to be of service to their community is also to understand it as well. The demographics along with the community information show that Orange County, like other counties in California, is a bit of crisis, however the law librarians rose to meet that challenge by having items ready and on hand like the eviction manual.

Conclusion

In all the reference interview and the way in functions in the real world is not so entirely different than what is mentioned in guides. However the main factor that does differentiate them is the fact that every library is a different community and as a result of that is it important to make take that into account when attempting to conduct reference interviews and providing services. The one main item that is consistent is the fact that a librarian must appear to be engaged and ready to help no matter if they are face to face or helping virtually. OCPLL service to Orange County is a unique library environment and what was made clear during the phone interview is that they are compassionate and caring. Mr. Nguyen said during the interview that himself and many of his colleagues work at the law library as a way to help others and that many of them left their former careers because they felt that they were not able provide a service to others while working within the law (L. Nguyen, personal communication, January 29, 2021). This concept sums up the OCPLL and

explains why their reference interviews and strategies for providing information services are successful but also are in line with successful ideas outlined in reference interview guides.

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